

... Docha looked up the narrow street, shielding her eyes from the bright, gaudy neon. The incessant noise and intrusive flashing lights made her head pound. She felt nauseous and dizzy. The buildings around her rose high into the air, giving the narrow street an even more threatening and claustrophobic character. The sun was setting somewhere, hidden by those tall, forbidding structures and to her the sky seemed small and dark. She longed for some quiet and some space. Vehicles shuttled backwards and forwards, in the street and high in the air, some outlined in that pervasive blue neon, some in red or green. People crowded by, too busy to notice her cowering backwards against the wall, frightened. The heat of this region felt unbearable to her now in this loud, chaotic street; she felt intimidated and hemmed-in by all these strange-looking people. They were all skimpily dressed in bright, patterned clothes. The amount of flesh on display everywhere both shocked and amused her. The overwhelming opulence and bright, patterns of colour, the constant music emanating from every angle all served to confuse her senses. It was just all too much for someone who had spent their lives in the slow-moving Skandia society. It was too hectic, too fast. She felt she couldn't think properly. Baronne placed his arm around her, understanding her confusion. She seemed even more overwhelmed than he had felt on his first day in Skandia.

'Don't be alarmed. You will get accustomed to this place. I came from a much quieter location within Lakeura myself. This was a shock to me the first time I came here, so goodness knows what it must be like for you. You are completely safe, though. There is no danger here, I promise.'

She fought back against the fear and confusion, even managing a brief laugh. 'This place is crazy. I mean, it is absolutely insane. How can you live like this? I need somewhere calm, where I can think straight. Please. Just for a short while.'

The crowded street they were in was not somewhere to take a leisurely stroll. People were rushing by after finishing work and were heading towards the subway; a stream of sweaty, shining humanity was disappearing from view into the jaws of the subway entrance.

‘I’m really sorry but we have to go that way too,’ said Baronne, nodding towards the hungry entrance which was swallowing the stream of people. ‘I don’t think there is anywhere quiet close by. Are you ready?’

Docha shook her head but sighed loudly and braced herself. ‘Okay, I have no choice. Let’s go!’

He held her hand and they ventured away from the perceived safety of the wall, rejoining the hectic, jostling flow of homeward-bound workers. They quickly descended the stone steps down into the subway, a refreshing burst of cooler air rushing up to greet them. Thankfully and surprisingly for Docha there seemed to be a little more space down there than in the street around the entrance and they turned left onto a long and mercifully wide platform. Within moments a white, sleek train appeared and once it had stopped, the glass panels separating the train from the platform slid open. It was packed and Docha’s immediate reaction was to back away, assuming they would wait for a less crowded option. Baronne grabbed her hand once more though, urging her forward and they pushed their way on board. There was a short, high pitched blast of noise and the doors slid shut once more, the train accelerating smoothly but frighteningly speedily into the darkness of the tunnel. They stood silently, Docha looking around at her fellow passengers, embarrassed by the proximity of uncovered arms and legs, uncomfortable with her own, equally revealing, green outfit. She was standing close to a young woman in a bright red dress with an extravagant gold and silver leaf pattern. She gave Docha a brief look back in reprimand for her curious stare. Docha turned away, burying her head in Baronne’s chest and stifling a curious giggle. It took her by surprise, as her overwhelming feeling was still one of fear, her senses heightened at the impending danger that she felt despite all of Baronne’s reassurances.

The train stopped. They stayed put as a dozen or more passengers worked their way past them through the train to disembark and a similar number took their place, pushing Baronne and Docha a little further into the carriage. She felt more claustrophobic than ever, trapped in this

crowded, airless tube train far underground. She buried her head in Baronne's chest once again.

'When do we get off this horrible thing?'

'Five or six stops yet,' he replied. 'Maybe ten, twelve minutes. Fifteen at the most. It should thin out a bit after the next couple of stops, though. More people will get off than on.'

Thankfully that was indeed the case and people started to pull down the seats at the side and take the weight off their feet. As each one did so they took out their small, electronic devices and started looking at them, occasionally touching and swiping the screens or typing. They were called handys. Mun had shown her one in the traffickers hideout and had tried to explain how it worked. She noticed that not a single person just sat. Each and every one of them seemed mesmerised by whatever they were viewing on that weird, thin rectangular screen that they held in their hands. Nobody looked at anyone else, let alone talked to them. Finally she noticed one person in the corner of the carriage who wasn't carrying a handy at all but seemed to be behaving even more oddly. She was staring blankly into space, turning, twisting and waving her hands and fingers in front of her eyes which seemed to shine and glint with unnatural light and colours.

Baronne lowered his voice to a quiet, discreet whisper, his mouth close to Docha's ear. 'They are posting on Konsensus or checking their ratings. Did they show you much about it?'

'Just the basics,' she whispered back, looking around furtively. 'There just wasn't time. He said I was lucky to be here with you. You would fill in all the details that he didn't have time to cover. It's weird. Quite scary.'

'I know. But you get drawn into it. You find yourself obsessing with the ratings. Making sure your dial is going clockwise. Terrified of going backwards and losing those ratings you have spent so long building up. The first thing I will do when we actually find this place is to- check how we are doing on our dials.'

After a few more stops the train was mostly empty but they remained standing, afraid of appearing strange and suspicious without their handys. Much to Docha's relief Baronne finally announced they were reaching their destination. She clung tightly to his hand when the train

stopped and they moved swiftly towards the door, disapproving looks coming from the few remaining passengers as they moved reluctantly aside to let them step off the train. They walked purposefully along the platform and turned right up a short stairway into a wide corridor. Then they stood on an escalator which whisked them upwards and, at last, out into the fresh air once more. A near naked man abruptly and rudely appeared directly in front of her, seemingly from nowhere.

‘Hello!’ he exclaimed loudly, an exaggerated, feigned look of confusion on his face. ‘Who are you? Are you moving clockwise? Don’t think we have your details yet. Would you like to...’ Baronne waved his right arm, clicking his fingers and the man simply disappeared into thin air.

‘It’s not real,’ he said, seeing Docha’s shocked look. ‘It’s an ad. They want you to buy something from them. Just do what I did and they will be gone.’

‘I’m not sure I could. It seems so rude. So... dismissive.’